

DOROTHY SCURA

Virginia Commonwealth University

Glasgow and the Southern Renaissance: The Conference at Charlottesville

THIRTY OF THEM ATTENDED that rather curious meeting in Charlottesville, Virginia, on October 23 and 24, 1931. They were all novelists, poets, literary critics, historians, playwrights, or biographers, and they all possessed various claims to the designation "Southern." The author of *Sanctuary* was there, as were the authors of *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch*, *Jurgen*, *To Have and to Hold*, *Porgy*, and *Relativity: A Romance of Science*.¹ Some were at the threshold of a career, while others had their productive years behind them. Ellen Glasgow had proposed such a gathering, the University of Virginia had invited them as guests at its "Southern Writers Conference," and they had accepted in what must have been a shared impulse to band together.

The official topic, which not many of them particularly liked, was "The Southern Author and His Public," and conversation ranged over this and other matters during three round-table discussions and a number of social events. Because the conference stressed informality and because the discussions failed to probe deeply into any one subject, the event raised no waves in the literary world. As the evidence of the meeting suggests, it was primarily a pleasant Virginia houseparty to celebrate the birth of what we now accept as the Southern Literary Renaissance.

The manuscript of Ellen Glasgow's opening speech and James Southall Wilson's typed schedule of events remain the only two pieces of hard evidence from the conference. Other documents include Wilson's file of letters, a newspaper account of the event, random references in personal letters of those who were present,

¹William Faulkner, Alice Hegan Rice, James Branch Cabell, Mary Johnston, DuBose Heyward, Archibald Henderson.

and three magazine articles by authors who attended.² The three articles—by Emily Clark, Josephine Pinckney, and Donald Davidson—cover the same ground, are fairly general and superficial, and attempt no actual record of the two days. Du Bose Heyward's newspaper article is written in a similar vein. A private letter by Sherwood Anderson, however, provides a franker account of the gathering and the participants.³

The schedule for the conference shows that activities were planned to keep the writers busy for both days at the Univer-

² All quotations in this paper from Glasgow's opening speech are from a rough manuscript of the talk now in the Ellen Glasgow Collection, University of Virginia Library.

Wilson's file on the conference, including the typed schedule of events, carbons of his correspondence with many authors, and the originals of the authors' responses, is in the James Southall Wilson Collection, University of Virginia Library. (In this file is a single letter to Wilson from Wolfe, which is a photocopy and not an original.) All quotations from letters in this paper which are not otherwise acknowledged are from this file.

For permission to quote from unpublished letters I am grateful to the following people: Mrs. Donald Davidson, Mrs. John Gould Fletcher, Mrs. Archibald Henderson, Mr. Garrard W. Glenn (for Isa Glenn), Mr. William Frederick (for H. L. Mencken), Mr. Allen Tate, Mr. Paul Gitlin (for Thomas Wolfe).

A copy of DuBose Heyward's newspaper account of the meeting is in the Wilson Collection at the University of Virginia Library. The manuscript of the article is now in the Heyward Collection at the South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina. Neither the newspaper account nor the manuscript reveals where the article was published. Richmond newspapers carried three stories about the meeting: "Noted Authors to be Guests of University," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, October 19, 1931, p. 10, col. 2; "Writers Gather at U. Va. Session," *Richmond News Leader*, October 23, 1931, p. 17, cols. 7, 8; "Southern Authors Informally Swap Views at University," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, October 24, 1931, p. 11, col. 1.

The three magazine articles are: Emily Clark, "A Weekend at Mr. Jefferson's University," *New York Herald-Tribune Books*, November 8, 1931, pp. 1-2; Josephine Pinckney, "Southern Writers' Congress," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 8 (November 7, 1931), 266; and Donald Davidson, "A Meeting of Southern Writers," *Bookman*, 74 (February 1932), 494-96. References to these articles will be cited by page number in the text.

³ Anderson's letter was written on the day he left Charlottesville to Laura Lou Copenhaver, the mother of Eleanor Copenhaver, who would become his wife in 1933. The letter is published in Howard Mumford Jones, ed., *Letters of Sherwood Anderson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953), pp. 250-54. The page number of references to this published letter will be cited in the text.

sity. The first session, at 11:00 a.m. on Friday, began with Glasgow's welcoming address and ended with an informal discussion by all the writers. Following a luncheon at Wilson's home (hosted by Wilson and Stringfellow Barr, editors of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*), there was a 3:00 p.m. auto trip to Castle Hill, the home of Amélie and Pierre Troubetzkoy. An informal dinner at the Farmington Country Club ended the day's schedule.

On Saturday an auto trip to Monticello was planned for 10:00 a.m., and a second round-table discussion at Madison Hall was set for 12:00. At 2:00 p.m. Mr. and Mrs. Garrard Glenn gave a luncheon for the group. (Glenn, the brother of Isa Glenn, the novelist, had successfully argued James Branch Cabell's *Jurgen* case in court in 1922.) The third round-table discussion was planned for 3:00 p.m.; and the final event, a Colonnade Club tea, was held at the Club House on the West Lawn at 4:00 p.m. The well-designed conference was marked by informality, gracious hospitality, a series of elegant settings, and much opportunity for conversation and discussion.

If among Southern writers in 1931 there existed a personal feeling of excitement about the state of Southern letters—a feeling which Glasgow had recognized—there had also been public recognition of the renewal of Southern writing. Articles published by Herschel Brickell, Glasgow, and Howard Mumford Jones had documented some of the literary activity.

As early as 1927, Brickell had written in a *Bookman* article, "The Literary Awakening in the South," that "A casual glance at the recent literary output of the United States discloses immediately that H. L. Mencken's 'Sahara of the Bozart,' the South, has suddenly burst into colorful bloom."⁴ Brickell mentioned some sixty-nine writers—from Conrad Aiken to Stark Young—to support his contention that it seemed to him to be no "exaggeration to speak of a Renaissance of literature in the South."

A year after Brickell's article appeared, Glasgow in *Harper's*

⁴ Herschel Brickell, "The Literary Awakening in the South," *Bookman*, 66 (1927), 138-43. Quotations in this paragraph are from pp. 138 and 139.

Magazine wrote of "The Novel in the South."⁵ First, she looked backward to assess the Uncle Remus stories and the work of Thomas Nelson Page, Charles Egbert Craddock, and James Lane Allen. Then, although she reserved her longest and most glowing tribute for her fellow-townsmen Cabell, she turned her gaze to the future and named "a little band of writers" who were "subjecting the raw material of life to the fearless scrutiny and the spacious treatment of art." Among those she cited were some who would attend the meeting in Charlottesville: Heyward, Green, Boyd, Stallings, Glenn and Clark. When she submitted the manuscript of the article to Cabell, he expressed his personal gratitude for her generous remarks about him, but he encouraged her to add more names to her initial list in order to make this "Southern renaissance" appear as extensive as possible.⁶

Near the close of the *Harper's* article, Glasgow named the ingredients necessary for great Southern novels: "And so it would seem that all qualities which will unite to make great Southern novels are the elemental properties which make great novels wherever they are written in any part of the world: power, passion, pity, ecstasy and anguish, hope and despair."⁷ These words anticipate her opening address to her assembled colleagues in Charlottesville three years later.

Jones carried the renaissance idea further in 1930 when he used as his title for a *Virginia Quarterly Review* article "Is There a Southern Renaissance?"⁸ He answered his question with a resounding yes, mentioned names already cited by Brickell or Glasgow, and concluded that "the South is the literary land of promise today." Thus by 1931 there must have been a general feeling among Southern authors that the rebirth of letters in their region was genuine, for it was a rebirth which they could easily observe and which had been documented in literary journals.

⁵ Ellen Glasgow, "The Novel in the South," *Harper's Magazine*, 158 (December 1928), 93-100.

⁶ Cabell wrote this in a letter to Glasgow dated September 17, 1928, now in the James Branch Cabell Collection, Clifton Waller Barrett Library, University of Virginia.

⁷ Glasgow, p. 100.

⁸ Howard Mumford Jones, "Is There a Literary Renaissance?" *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 6 (1930), 184-97.

It was Glasgow, however, who originally gave voice to the idea of a Southern Writers Conference and pointed out to her friend Wilson that "it was unfortunate that Southern writers are too widely scattered even to meet each other."⁹ That the idea for the meeting had been in her mind for some time cannot be doubted: for when Isa Glenn accepted Wilson's invitation to the conference, she wrote, "Miss Glasgow spoke to me of her intention of starting something of the sort, nearly two years ago: and I thought then, as I do now, that it's vitally necessary, if the South is to come in for what she deserves: for, as Ellen said then, we now have a larger number of first-rate authors in the South than has any other section of the country."

Nine months of diligent work by Wilson actually preceded the Charlottesville meeting, which seemed at the time to be so spontaneous and informal. On January 10, he had reminded Glasgow of her idea and suggested having a group of Southern writers come to the University of Virginia for "a day or two's pow-wow." Later in January, Du Bose Heyward of Charleston and Archibald Henderson of Chapel Hill met with Wilson in Charlottesville to talk about the project. Wilson assured Heyward and Henderson that the work would be done by Wilson himself and that the committee's functions would be advisory and honorary.

The first item of business at the initial meeting seems to have been to form a central committee of authors in whose names Wilson would issue invitations. From the beginning Glasgow was considered to be a member, and at the first meeting Heyward and Henderson insisted that James Branch Cabell be included. After much persuasion, Cabell reluctantly agreed if Stark Young, the novelist and drama editor of the *New Republic*, and Paul Green, the playwright, would be included to maintain a good balance.¹⁰

Willa Cather and John Crowe Ransom were invited to serve,

⁹ Wilson, in a letter to Glasgow dated January 10, 1931, is quoting Glasgow. This letter is in the Wilson Collection, University of Virginia Library.

¹⁰ Wilson quoted Cabell in a letter dated February 3, 1931, to Archibald Henderson.

but both refused. Ransom sent a telegram to Wilson explaining that he could not get away for the conference. Cather responded that any public use of her name might bring public intrusions and that she planned to spend time in California with her seriously ill mother. Thomas Wolfe was then asked to serve. Only thirty-one years old and "agonizing" over his second book, Wolfe wrote Wilson: "I want you to know that I am deeply sensible of the honor you have done me in placing me on a committee with such distinguished and talented people as you have: I know it is an honor I do not deserve" Thus the central committee was assembled: Glasgow, Cabell, Henderson, Heyward, Young, Green, and Wolfe.

Guests to be invited were then selected by the committee. Wilson submitted an inclusive list of authors to each committee member, who checked twenty to twenty-five names. Names not on the list could be added. Wilson then took the results of this poll and submitted a second list to committee members for them to check candidates. A final list was compiled by Wilson with names divided, according to the number of votes received, into a first and second list for invitations. As an author on the first list refused, one on the second list was invited.

If the mode of choosing the participants seems more like a method of selecting country club memberships than of evaluating serious writers, it is indicative of Wilson's delicacy in handling the personal side of the conference. His contacts with the committee were diplomatic and gentle, and his written invitations to the guests were masterpieces of tact: he offered accommodations at either the Monticello Hotel or the Farmington Country Club; he assured each guest of complete informality; and he provided protection so that each guest, if he chose, could avoid any scheduled event or outside invitation. The fact that so many writers came and had a good time shows the sympathetic understanding of Wilson and the University of Virginia faculty members who assisted him;¹¹ the fact that the meeting

¹¹ Stringfellow Barr, as well as several other University of Virginia faculty members, aided Wilson during the conference by attending the scheduled events and by driving the authors and entertaining them.

did not become a forum for penetrating discussion is probably also due to the atmosphere they created.

Many of those invited declined for various reasons. T. S. Stribling abruptly refused without explanation. Roark Bradford, and later Wolfe, begged off because of work. Bradford explained he would be busy at his typewriter on a plantation in northwest Louisiana in October. Irvin Cobb pleaded important other plans. Burton Rascoe, just out of the hospital, was not physically able to come, and Margaret Prescott Montague also refused for health reasons. Elizabeth Madox Roberts explained that she was in the midst of building a house and could not get away. In addition, Herbert Ravenal Sass, Lizette Woodworth Reese, and Stark Young sent regrets. Julia Peterkin had planned to attend, but was prevented because her husband suffered an accident.

H. L. Mencken, who would have had the opportunity of seeing the Bozart in bloom, did not come either. Mencken had written Cabell in July: "Going to orgies at universities is very far out of my line, but I am already tempted." He said he would leave the decision to his wife, a former Goucher College teacher, "who is much less shy of the learned than I am."¹² Sara Haardt Mencken and her husband eventually claimed they could not come because of a prior engagement in New Orleans. Conrad Aiken also refused. He wrote from Rye, Sussex, that though he would "like the opportunity of meeting so many people whose work interests me," he could not possibly afford "such a protracted and expensive expedition." He expressed "mortal fear" of "speech-making and formal dinners" and distrust of "the value of deliberate conferences" and "of any attempt at 'sectionalization' of the arts."

In contrast to the reservations Aiken had about the meeting, William Faulkner confessed no such serious concerns. Instead, the author of the just-published *Sanctuary* offered a fable to demonstrate both his acceptance and his apprehensions:

Thank you for your invitation. I would like very much to avail myself of it, what with your letter's pleasing assurance that

¹² Cabell wrote this to Mencken in a letter dated July 24, 1931, which is now in the Cabell Collection, University of Virginia Library.

loopholes will be supplied to them who have peculiarities about social gambits. You have seen a country wagon come into town, with a hound dog under the wagon. It stops on the square and the folks get out, but that hound never gets very far from that wagon. He might be cajoled or scared out for a short distance, but first thing you know he has scuttled back under the wagon; maybe he growls at you a little. Well that's me.¹³

And so they came to Charlottesville, these thirty Southerners: William Faulkner from Mississippi and Alice Hegan Rice and Cale Young Rice from Kentucky. From South Carolina came Josephine Pinckney and Dorothy and Du Bose Heyward. From North Carolina came Archibald Henderson, Paul Green, James Boyd, Katherine Newlin Burt, and Struthers Burt. From Tennessee came Donald Davidson, Caroline Gordon, Allen Tate, and Mary and Stanton Chapman. And from Virginia came Ellen Glasgow, James Branch Cabell, Mary Johnston, Sherwood Anderson, and Amélie Rives Troubetzkoy.¹⁴

A number of Southerners who no longer lived in the South returned for the occasion: Emily Clark Balch of Richmond came from Philadelphia; Katharine Anthony of Arkansas, Helen Poteat Stallings (Mrs. Laurence Stallings) of North Carolina, Isa Glenn of Georgia, Herschel Brickell of Mississippi, and Irita Van Doren of Alabama—all came down from New York. U. B. Phillips, born in Georgia, and William E. Dodd, born in North Carolina, came respectively from Yale and the University of Chicago. John Peale Bishop, born in West Virginia, delayed his return to his home in Paris, France, in order to be present.

Although all those attending possessed some claim to being Southern, a few connections were rather tenuous. Sherwood

¹³ Joseph Blotner, in *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1974), pp. 705-16, tells of Faulkner's participation in this meeting. On p. 706 Blotner quotes from Faulkner's acceptance letter to Wilson. I did not see Blotner's account until after this paper was written.

¹⁴ Although she was included in the published account of those who attended, Princess Troubetzkoy did not attend the sessions; she did entertain the authors in her home.

Davidson's published account mentions that Andrew Nelson Lytle, Lawrence Lee, and Agnes Rothery Pratt attended some of the sessions. Their names do not appear on Wilson's guest list.

Anderson, for example, had been born in Camden, Ohio, and had led a nomadic life before moving to Marion, Virginia, in 1925. During the meeting he declared that his best credential for being called Southern was that he had Italian blood. The novelist Struthers Burt had been born in New York, and he divided his year with summers in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and winters in Southern Pines, North Carolina. Stanton Chapman was a London native who had been naturalized in 1927. He was a Southerner by marriage, however, because Mary Chapman was a native of Tennessee. And the historical novelist James Boyd had been born in Pennsylvania but had moved to North Carolina, the home of his ancestors, at the age of thirteen.

Many of those present at the 1931 meeting had contributed generously to the recent upsurge of literary activity in the South. Glasgow, for example, had published two of her comedies of manners (in 1926 and 1929) and was completing the third, *The Sheltered Life* (1932). The Storisende Edition of Cabell's work (1927-30), eighteen volumes of the Biography of Manuel, had been completed, plus two comic novels, *Something About Eve* (1927) and *The Way of Ecbe*n (1929), and a collection of essays on literary personalities, *Some of Us* (1930). Faulkner had published six novels; the three most recent were *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), and *Sanctuary* (1931). Although Anderson's only best-seller, *Dark Laughter*, had been published in 1925, between 1926 and 1931, when he was living in Virginia, he published four books: *Sherwood Anderson's Notebook* (1926), *Tar: A Midwestern Childhood* (1927), *Hello Towns!* (1929), and *Perhaps Women* (1931). For Paul Green too, the late twenties had also been a time of great accomplishment. In 1927, for example, two of his plays opened in New York, *In Abraham's Bosom* and *The Field God*; the former won the Pulitzer Prize for that year. Also, his play *The House of Connelly* had just opened in New York. Davidson and Tate had both contributed to *I'll Take My Stand*, the Agrarian manifesto of 1930, and both had published volumes of poetry: Tate's *Mr. Pope and Other Poems* (1928) and *Three Poems* (1930) and Davidson's *The Tall Men* (1927). In addition, Tate had written biographies of Stonewall Jackson (1928) and Jefferson Davis (1929). Some other contributions of those present may not be so well remembered today,

but a large number of writers at the gathering were actively publishing books in a variety of fields.

During the two days of the meeting two topics of discussion are mentioned in the printed accounts—book reviews and Southern stability. Rice, the Kentucky poet and dramatist, and Davidson, former editor of the Nashville *Tennessean* book page, lamented the lack of local criticism in the form of book reviews in Southern newspapers. Barr's explanation for this absence, which made the Southern writer dependent on the New York critics, was that Southerners were not inclined to buy books (Clark, p. 2).

Green's laudatory words about technological progress seem to have provided the most tense moments of the meeting. During a discussion in which Bishop and Boyd praised the value of the fixity and stability of the Southern tradition, Green, "looking like a prophet out of the wilderness," in Clark's words, disclaimed these values and advocated the great benefits of the machine age. Green explained that Mr. Duke argued for the establishment of schools in his state so that people could become enlightened and thus make more money. And "through the worst intentions of the machine age," said Green, North Carolina was delivered "from slavery." Green termed the revolt against the machine age "nonsense" and announced that "any little runt who is driving a high-powered car at sixty miles an hour is going toward God." In response, Dodd assured those present that "the machine age was dead."¹⁵ If Davidson or Tate responded to Green's shocking assertions, there is no record of what they said, although Davidson later wrote Wilson that at another time and place Green might have received more vocal response.

Anderson's letter to Mrs. Copenhaver provides a characteristic glimpse of Cabell at the conference. Anderson reported that Cabell had a "face like a baby's" and was "clever at retort, always with a streak of maliciousness" (p. 251). Cabell employed his mischievous spirit two years later in *Special Delivery* in what seems to be his version of the Charlottesville meeting:

¹⁵ Quotations in this paragraph are from Clark, p. 2, except for the last two quotations, which are from Davidson, p. 496.

Because of my own peccadillos in print I was privileged no great while ago to attend a gathering of some forty professional writers under frankly educational auspices. We responded, it may be, to our auspices. In any case, affairs had reached the stage called "an open discussion" of I never discovered just what, and the refrain of our morning-long liturgy stayed constant.

One after another these somewhat strange looking persons—for authorship, whatever it may do for the mind, does not beautify the body—arose and coughed. Thereafter each so deferentially cleared throat spoke with dauntless conviction of our duty,—of our multi-fold duties to the public, to art, to altruism, to posterity, to the American spirit (for it was generally agreed that our masterworks ought to be "autochthonous"), and I even heard two elderly persons of my own obsolete generation dwell upon our special duty toward that free-handed Deity who had blessed us with special talents. It all sounded most handsomely, and it made the business of writing any salable form of reading-matter seem a high-minded and painful pursuit wherein only seers and martyrs might hope to excel.

I listened, I admit, in extreme melancholy begotten by low envy of such elevated sentiments. My reflection was that for some reason or another such sentiments quite obviously caused their expounder's socks to wrinkle and to slide yet more downward, the higher that his moral fervor aspired. In the while that I wondered over this phenomenon the young woman who sat beside me remarked sotto voce, "But I write because I like to!"¹⁶

Anderson's own feelings about the discussion sessions were similar to Cabell's: ". . . the meeting got bad—long, tiresome speeches from professors. Everyone began to think it was going to be like a dentists' convention" (p. 251).

The failure of the Charlottesville meeting to be as exciting and productive as one would wish may have been due to the choice of the subject for consideration. John Gould Fletcher, for one, complained about the topic "The Southern Author and His Public" in his response to Wilson's invitation. Because he considered the theme too "academic" and not "deep enough," he suggested alternate subjects: "For instance, you might talk about the South and Industrialism, or the Proper Political course for the South to follow in order to control its own economy, or the question whether all present-day educational books used in the

¹⁶ James Branch Cabell, *Special Delivery* (New York: Robert M. McBride, 1933), pp. 123-25.

South are not tainted with the assumption which the present-world situation shows to be untenable, that an industrial and competitive system makes for progress." While Fletcher wanted the attention of those attending to be directed to large and publicly significant problems, Wolfe appealed to Wilson to direct the attention of the writers to themselves. He wrote Wilson that he was not interested in "literary chat," but in "the actual physical aspect" of the writer's work: "I do like to know how they work—how long they work at a time, how many hours a day, how much they can do in a day, how long it takes them to write their books"

The topic, however, remained as stated by the original committee, who probably felt it important because of the attention paid to it by Jones in his "Southern Renaissance" article the preceding year. Jones observed early in the article that although many Southern authors were writing books, their publishers found that readers in the Southern states did not buy books in important numbers and that the Southern writer was almost wholly dependent for recognition on such non-Southern literary journals as the *Saturday Review* and *Bookman*. Thus Jones's mention of the twin problems of a meager reading public and a shortage of influential organs of review may have suggested the general topic for the Charlottesville meeting.

In her opening speech to the conference, Glasgow herself could not come to terms with "The Southern Author and His Public." The manuscript of her speech provides evidence of the difficulty she faced. One marked-out but still-legible paragraph reads:

By this time, you have observed, no doubt, that I have carefully avoided the subject of our general discussion. Candidly, I have little interest in publics. Like presidents, they fail to impress me because I so seldom agree with them. Even when a public appears in Roman dress on the stage, I immediately suspect that it is not there for any good, but for purposes of assassination. So I find but one approach to this topic, and that is with the question: How much or how little should a writer participate, as we may say, in his own public?

A second and third abortive attempt to discuss the problem are also deleted:

As for the immediate topic for discussion, I hesitate, I must admit to venture upon it, for it appears to me to be little more than a thin crust—over what?

As for the immediate discussion, I admit shamelessly that I am more interested in the Southern writer than I am in a public which seems to me to be composed either of words or of a sanguine illusion. What Southern writers may be, I am perfectly convinced that there is no public.

Glasgow presided at the first event of the conference, and in a humorous beginning to her opening address pointed out that she spoke in Cabell's place:

When I was asked, as the only woman on this committee, to bid you welcome to Virginia, I modestly replied that women come before men only in shipwreck. But Mr. James Branch Cabell, who imposes his duty upon me, is constrained to illustrate his theory that after fifty the only thing worth doing is to decline to do anything. I, on the contrary, believe quite as firmly that the longer one lives in this world of hazard and escapes disaster, the more reckless one should become—at least in the matter of words.

She immediately observed "how elastic the term Southern writer may become when it is properly stretched" and noted that some of those present were not born in the South and some did not live in the South; but she quickly moved away from any parochial categorizing to call those present "not only Southern writers, but world writers." She explained that Southern writers were no longer expected to fall into "a kind of Swiss guard of defense," for not only was a defense of civilization "impertinent," but "the South needs defenders as little as it needs apologists."

She then moved to an examination of the problem of truth and distinguished between two kinds: the truth of life and the truth of art, which includes both history and fiction. Writers, she said, must learn to be tolerant of truths other than their own: "All we ask of any writer is that he shall be honest with himself, that he shall possess artistic integrity."

Then Miss Glasgow expressed her sympathy with "that outcast from the machine civilization—the well-bred person." After recounting her own early beginning in the 1890's as a "champion of the oppressed" and explaining that the protagonist of her first book was illegitimate and the son of a "poor white," she observed,

"Always I was in the skin of the fox at every hunt and in the skin of the yellow dog under the wagon at every village fair." Then, however, since the situation had so reversed itself that it became fashionable and snobbish to be lowly, despised, and rejected, Miss Glasgow had switched her sympathies to embrace those persons whose breeding was evidenced by "simplicity and consideration for others."

Finally, she incorporated the conference topic into her speech by using it as a bridge to a new subject, the reasons for more compassion in contemporary German literature than in American literature. She asserted that she was actually more interested in American literature for what it does not say, than for what it does say:

If I might have chosen the topic for discussion, I should have avoided the Southern writer and his public, especially since that public is usually situated far away from the South, and have tried to discover why America which suffered so little from the world war in fact should have suffered more deeply in spirit than the devastated countries. It is historically and eternally true that only in material defeat is there spiritual victory.

Her praise of German literature was used to criticize the lack of compassion in American literature. She stated that "the only safe substitute for genius in American literature is brutality."

In her closing statement Glasgow identified herself as one who had never flinched before truth. Then she offered a peroration: "Only let us learn from Dostoyevsky that if nothing is more terrible than life, nothing is more pitiable. Love may go; sex may go . . . but as Russia knew yesterday and Germany has discovered today, pity survives. Otherwise, the machine age may as well destroy itself while it prepares the world for the insect."

It was a high-minded, serious address which appealed to the universal concerns of the writer. The timeless problems of truth and of compassion in literature took precedence over contemporary issues. The scheduled topic was almost completely ignored.

Glasgow's delivery of her speech must have been effective, for Davidson in his published account called the speech "brilliant and witty." And Tate wrote Young that "the more I think about

grand Ellen Glasgow, the more I fall in love with her. None of her books is as grand as she is."¹⁷ Anderson said of her: "Ellen Glasgow took charge. She is charming. She is quite old now, but had tremendous vitality . . . a kind of mental alertness, eagerness, and charm" (p. 250). Wilson told her she carried through the first day "triumphantly."

After the conference ended, there were, on the one hand, the inevitable disappointments in a meeting attended by such differing personalities, among whom there were such varying expectations. On the other hand, for those who came for a party and for satisfying the curiosity of meeting other writers, there seemed to be a consensus of pleasure. Clark—who had accepted the invitation with enthusiasm but whose main concern, as expressed in her letter to Wilson, was to be put up at the Farmington Country Club (of which she was a member) and to be given a room with a bath—made the meeting sound like a merry and charming houseparty. In her *Saturday Review* account she wrote of "Morning at Monticello, among vistas so wide that thirty guests were easily lost among them; afternoon at Castle Hill, with Amélie and Pierre Troubetzkoy coming down the box driveway to meet the cars . . . sunset at the Colonnade Club with a black-trunked, gold-topped ash tree gleaming at the end of the colonnade; moonlight at the Farmington Club, the loveliest club in Virginia . . ." (p. 2). Wilson preferred her sprightly account to the others and called it "the most interesting and delightful" of all.¹⁸ Anderson's impression of the Farmington Country Club gathering was also a pleasant one: "After dinner at the club a big crowd gathered about Barr, Ellen Glasgow and myself. We got into an amusing wrangle over some abstract subject, more to hang conversation on than anything else. Presently all joined it. It was the first real thaw-out, fun, going it hot and heavy, good-natured raillery and good talk" (p. 252).

Heyward's newspaper account stated that the gathering had

¹⁷ Young quotes Tate in a letter to Glasgow dated January 11, 1932. This letter is in the Glasgow Collection, University of Virginia Library.

¹⁸ Wilson made this comment in a letter to Glasgow dated November 16, 1931, in which he congratulated her on her performance at the Conference. He enclosed copies of the published accounts. The letter is in the Glasgow Collection, University of Virginia Library.

marked a cultural milestone in the South, and Boyd also commented on the social aspects of the meeting when he wrote in a letter to Wilson that he (Wilson) must be "rather proud at having demonstrated that anything as dubious as a prearranged literary gathering can be made so spontaneous, informal, stimulating and delightful." Boyd then told Wilson that "your undertaking scored a double triumph in that nothing definite was accomplished and something indefinite was."

Others, however, did not view the lack of definite accomplishment as quite the triumph Boyd did. Davidson and Tate, forged in the fire of a different kind of informal and stimulating meeting with the Nashville Fugitives, wrote Wilson letters which indicated their belief that the historical, elegant—perhaps soporific—Virginia setting may have impeded a real clash of ideas. Davidson mentioned in his published article that the meeting had "no name," "no program," and "no purpose" other than to bring writers together and see what would happen in the "pleasant and stately circumstances of Mr. Jefferson's University" (p. 494). He pointed out that not much mention was made of regionalism, sectionalism, or any other "ism": "Most of the sleeping dogs that have now and then growled in Southern Councils dozed on unawakened" (p. 495). Nevertheless, Davidson called this first conference a "great success," and he wrote Wilson that he hoped to be invited to future ones. He admitted that it could not have gone off so well except under "Virginia auspices—certainly not for this first time, when nobody could tell how the wild men from the western wilderness would get along with the magician of Poictesme, or just what South Carolina (under literary circumstances) would say to North Carolina." He also carefully stated some serious considerations:

I am somewhat disturbed by the thought, however, that, at some other possible meeting-place, the swapping of ideas which was in the main so friendly and generous at Madison Hall, might easily turn into a fierce clashing of ideas. At one time during the past meeting, perhaps it was only the shade of Mr. Jefferson that prevented a schism. I could think of places where the remarks of Mr. Paul Green, for instance, might have been challenged more sharply than anybody felt like challenging them at our meeting. There's much to reflect on here. Perhaps the thought, if I dared to frame it, would be that it will take a prestige like old Virginia's to prevent

internecine quarrels among Southern writers who have this or that idea of what is to be done about the South and its tradition. I am one of those who hope that Virginia's position, as of old, will favor Tradition, in a conservative and reconciling sense—for otherwise there is Mr. Paul Green, able, intense, ready to blow us all to bits.

Allen Tate, too, was not completely satisfied with the results of the meeting. Like Davidson, his pleasure had been somewhat tempered by thoughtfulness. He wrote Wilson, "Perhaps at later conferences we shall lose some of this amiability—an inevitable loss if we shall ever discuss the fundamental questions that confront Southerners today." Tate believed "that the leading question before Southern literature is the nature of its peculiar genius, and perhaps it will some time be appropriate for Southern writers, in the lack of political leadership, to point out certain features of the question that do not ordinarily pertain to the literary problem." Both Tate and Davidson, though they enjoyed the meeting and hoped it would become an annual affair, seemed disappointed at the lack of depth and seriousness in Charlottesville.

Pinckney described the gathering as being neither serious nor frivolous, but both. In searching for some meaning to the conference, she hypothesized a somewhat dubious value when she suggested that "if authors could come together, air their problems, pleasure themselves, then life as described in books might not be such a grim business."

Anderson summed up the meeting quite simply: "There didn't seem to be any definite thing accomplished. There were a lot of talks I didn't hear. I think the Agrarians were the only ones trying to put over any definite program" (p. 253). It is possible that his stark analysis contained the most accurate evaluation.

Henderson, the University of North Carolina professor of mathematics and biographer of Shaw, criticized the results of the meeting with bluntness and candor. He wrote Wilson that the one purpose accomplished at the meeting, acquainting authors personally with each other, may have been good enough for this initial meeting, but that it was not "sufficient justification for the conference." His assessment proves that not everyone considered the topic for discussion unworthy and suggests that not everyone was dazzled by Ellen Glasgow's performance. Hender-

son thought the air of amiability and charm got in the way of something of value; he suggested that the meetings continue, but he insisted on a more serious approach:

The conference appears to have been almost wholly subjective: with few exceptions the expressed views were vague and inchoate, leading nowhere and never arriving. A conference of this sort is futile if it has not some large and significant objective, of a constructive sort. Next time, the fear which seemed to paralyze Heyward and others lest something be done, may have worn off.

All the conferences cannot be, as someone expressed it, "glorified house parties." And this first conference leaves all the major problems, and even the minor problems, both unattacked or even undiscussed. The blitheful, ostrich-like ignoring, by our handsomely dressed, prosperous authors, in their high-powered cars, of the existence of a reading public (without which they could not thus disport themselves or even exist) was the huge, ironic job of the conference. I am afraid this was a by-product of luxurious and vapid femininity.

Constructive ideas—not subjective vaporings—my dear Wilson—are what the poor South needs. A conference must go dead soon as it supply and nourish them not.

There were, perhaps, some small results from the Charlottesville meeting in 1931: Faulkner made his first acquaintance with the University he was to distinguish with his presence a quarter of a century later; Glasgow and Tate formed what would become a warm friendship; and Cabell transformed his experiences into an amusing essay in *Special Delivery* (1933). But as a forum for exchanging constructive ideas the conference seems to have been a failure, even though its success as a houseparty is well documented by the many enthusiastic letters written to Wilson after the event. And the general desire to continue the meetings was strong enough to support a second meeting in Charleston in 1932.

Thus the 1931 meeting was a recognition, as well as a celebration, of the development in Southern writing now known as the Southern Literary Renaissance. For this event Glasgow briefly asserted herself to play a leading role in Southern letters.¹⁹ Age and illness would prevent her continuing in the part,

¹⁹ Professor Frederick P. W. McDowell in *Ellen Glasgow and the Ironic Art of Fiction* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963),

for in 1933 she wrote Wilson from Baltimore, where she was undergoing medical treatment, to request that he arrange for her resignation from the committee, which was apparently still in existence at that time.²⁰ But even in her triumphant speech, which was so well-received in Charlottesville, were the seeds of the literary conservatism that would have in any case precluded her continuing the role as a leader: her spirited defense of the well-bred and her equally spirited attack on what she termed "brutality" in modern letters.

Still, without meetings, the Renaissance continued to flower, and many of those present at the 1931 gathering made important contributions. Now, over four decades later, when the Southern Literary Renaissance is history, many of those thirty are all but forgotten; yet others—Faulkner, Tate, Anderson, Glasgow, Cabell, and Green, for example—have won a claim to a permanent place in literary history.

Postscript

At the meeting in Charleston on October 21 and 22, 1932, Du Bose Heyward played Wilson's Charlottesville role and the committee remained the same: Glasgow, Cabell, Henderson, Green, Young, Wolfe, and Heyward. The typed schedule of events lists luncheons at Fort Sumter and the Brewton Inn, dinner at the Charleston Country Club, trips to Fort Sumter and to Magnolia and Middleton Gardens. Two meetings were scheduled, one at the beginning on Friday and one at the 3:00 p.m. closing on Saturday; no topic for these meetings is noted.²¹ Thus the very idea of the worthiness of Southern authors convening annually may have finally foundered on the shoals of a cocktail party given by the Junior League Scribblers' Group in Charleston. Not

p. 33, observes that Glasgow saw the beginnings of the Renaissance early and that with this Charlottesville meeting it seemed that she "might achieve substantial leadership in American letters."

²⁰ This letter, dated June 8, 1933, is in the Glasgow Collection, University of Virginia Library.

²¹ For information about the Charleston meeting, I am indebted to Mrs. Granville T. Prior of the South Carolina Historical Society, who provided me with copies of material now in the DuBose Heyward Collection.

a single member of the committee, with the exception of Heyward, attended the Charleston meeting. Glasgow was ill and Cabell had a distaste for literary gatherings that he had compromised for Charlottesville, but would not for Charleston. Henderson's letter to Wilson after the Charlottesville meeting had been prophetic: lacking the substance of constructive ideas, the conference died from lack of nourishment.
